



National Signing Day/College Football Playoff Dec. 15, 2021

Head Coach Luke Fickell

Opening Statement

“Well, this is a very busy day. I am not sure we have always done it like this, maybe we had planned for a, ‘not practice, day’ on National Signing Day. But today, in particular, a lot of things going on. We started out at 7:00 in the morning and I think we had everything wrapped up, with the exception for Luther Richesson (football signee) who is on central time, had to wait an hour, but everything pretty much wrapped up by 7:20 or 7:30am. All in all...very good. Obviously, you can look at the 20 guys we signed...19 high school guys, I think. Eight from Ohio and 14 in a 300-mile radius, which is the core of our program. And again, sticking into that same kind of mold that we want 75% or so of the team from that 300-mile radius. Then we signed six...one from New Jersey, one from Maryland, three from Florida and one from Alabama. To me, that gives us a lot of opportunities, not to say we broadened it, but this is the first time we had a guy from Jersey. We haven’t had a guy from Maryland, haven’t had a guy from Alabama in a while and we’ve had some guys from Florida. All-in-all, it’s a really good mix and it’s becoming a little but more unique as to how many you can sign and do sign. Recruiting is the lifeblood of what we do and how you build. Right now, it is becoming a little bit different. Recruiting is number one...actually number one is retaining our guys. These guys you got in your program, you got to be able to retain them. I think with a lot of things we saw in the last year, with the guys having opportunities to take off and things, it is really key that you can retain these guys, so you continue to have a chance to build a relationship and develop them. Retention is big and recruiting is another one...your ability to fill in the gaps and those things. For us, those things that we might not get through recruiting with some transfers or, what people are calling the ‘free agency of college football,’ today. For us, this is the way we build our program. This is the way we continue to grow our program through recruiting. It is not going to change, and we are excited and happy about the class we got. I think we got nine high school guys and one transfer guy that will be in here as of Jan. 10th to be involved in all of our winter workouts and spring football, which gives us and those guys a big advantage to see if those guys can help us early on, especially with the number of seniors we are losing.”

On how important this recruiting class was with 30-plus seniors leaving

“I think it is critical. I think that if you are looking to build it from this class, you are in trouble. In some ways, you got to be looking two years out and I think that is when some of the ‘transfer’

stuff starts to become something that is a possibility, but that is not how we want to go or build. The unique thing is that this is a large senior class, but you still have roster management which is very unique and now everybody is going to do it. There are a lot of guys that are seniors that still have possibilities to, if they wanted, to come back. So, for the next few years, without ever knowing exactly what class these guys are in, it makes it difficult to manage some of the things that you are doing...especially in the recruiting side of things.”

On team’s mindset and mentality preparing for CFP semi-final

“We are in prep, but it is not like we are prepping for the game just yet. But the mentality is awesome. If you were to come out there to practice today, you wouldn’t have recognized what is going on out here. I think the ball goes down and those guys compete, especially the guys towards the end of practice and it gets very energetic. I think the mindset is in a very good place. What we are trying to do as coaches is to not really start doing what we need to do too soon, because with 18–22-year old’s, it doesn’t take much to make them bored. And I am not saying they are going to be bored going into a playoff game against a team like Alabama, but if you practice nine practices all the same way, all preparing for one game, then, yeah, by the time the last three practices come, it’s a bit boring. It is a good balance, and trying to give those guys an opportunity to play and have a little fun all while preparing for the ultimate goal.”

On maintaining relationships down the depth chart

“Well, they are what your future is. That is why, if you say, ‘you are losing a lot of seniors so you got to have a really good class this year...’ I mean, if you are banking on a lot of these young guys being a core nucleus, I’m not saying they can’t help or they can’t play, because there are a lot of guys on here you may say have opportunities, and especially if they come in early, of really finding a way to get on the football field for you. You know, besides Mason Fletcher (freshman punter), there’s really not true freshman that had much of a role. Bryon Threats (freshman safety) does a great job on special teams and is a back-up. Other than that, there’s not many guys that travel with us...this group could be different because of the amount of seniors we had. I think it is really critical to look at the year-before’s recruiting class, and that year before. It is that two-year period that one of the best things our coaches have done is the ability to retain these guys. I am not saying it is for sure... As soon as you say you are good at retention you lose guys, but I think it has a lot to do with relationships and time spent with them. A lot of it has to do with honesty. If you are honest with them, if you want to build something with them when times are tough, and I think you can ask anyone on our team right now that didn’t get many opportunities to play that those times our tough. Some people say, ‘You guys win...you guys are in the playoffs, but we all have a selfish nature to us. So, our ability to retain those guys and give us a chance to develop, that is where the future really comes and we will see with these guys coming in early that can make a true impact.”

On how Big 12 impacted recruiting

“I don’t know if it changed anything on our end specifically. Like all the sudden we have to find a guy that is an inch taller and faster now because we are going into the Big 12 - no. We have always said we want to find the right ones. We have never looked at ourselves as anything different, whether it is the AAC or the Big 12. Were there some doors that could now open and

some hurdles we could take down? Of course. The biggest sticking point with recruits, and I don't want to say it hindered us, but it was a talking point as the league. When we are officially in the Big 12, I am not going to say there is any difference between leagues. Whether there are direct lines to the playoffs, we are all playing on the same field. We know that some people have more resources than others. It comes down to how you use yours. And the recruiting that some of our kids did during the summer was really, really good. What I think that the Big 12 did for us was give us a little bit more strength. We had already committed some really good football players, and they play a little bit more their senior year with how good they are. They were already recruited to us, but it gave us another bat in the chamber for when someone comes after them."

On the recruiting impact from the success of Ahmad Gardner (junior cornerback), Desmond Ridder (senior quarterback) and Myjai Sanders (senior defensive lineman)

"That had as big of an impact on getting those guys as anything, when they can see the development that has happened... Let's be honest, winning and things like that have a greater effect on 17- and 18-year-olds than really anything else. I know that facilities and different things like that are all a big part of it, but the success, not just of your football team, but of some of those guys that they envision themselves being like. JQ (Hardaway, cornerback signee), being a long, big kid that plays cornerback, envisions himself being like Ahmad (Gardner, junior cornerback). Had Ahmad not done what he's done, I don't know that you have a kid from Alabama, as good as he is, that would be as interested and tied to us if he couldn't compare himself to what Ahmad has done. And it's not just going to be a one-year thing, I think as the season wraps up at some point and the Senior Bowl kicks in, that will be a big deal for the next class of recruits. The all the sudden, the NFL Combine is going to happen and we're going to have an enormous amount of guys at it and then the NFL Draft... All those things will have an incredible impact on giving us greater opportunities to show kids what it's really like here. The thing that we want to continue to do is to focus on the real. When you get into some recruiting battles, I think these kids have to do a better job at recognizing the real. I say that with eight kids from Ohio. The production that our Ohio kids have had probably outmatches anybody in the country. If you really look at the production of what the kids from our state, especially the kids from Cincinnati, have done for this program, I think a lot of those young guys have to recognize that, because that's a big deal. If I was a kid being recruited, I say, 'look at where these kids are having success.'"

On what makes Ahmad Gardner (junior cornerback) the "perfect" recruit

"Well, he's the perfect recruit because the guys sitting up here didn't think he'd be able to play for us for two years. That tells you how good we really are, right? This skinny kid came in here, and maybe in two years he'd be fast enough and strong enough to play for us, because whatever he was weighing wasn't enough or he probably couldn't run fast enough. And you know, he proved us completely wrong. Everybody looks for things like, 'this guy matches up with this,' and for a guy that was overlooked in a lot of ways, to have success and have success early... That's the thing with a lot of kids. They want to go to a program where they can play early. And to see what Ahmad did as a young guy, it really helps us when talking to these guys. I know it was a big deal for JQ (Hardaway, cornerback signee), a guy that had a lot of

opportunities and could've stayed close to home with a lot of schools down south. He's one of those guys that I think is smart enough to look and say, 'Where's a place that I have a chance to play at an earlier time?' And I think that connection, with him envisioning himself being a lot like Ahmad, goes a long way. I think it's more than just Ahmad, but the unique thing about him is, he's a guy who has a sauce chain, but he really is a humble guy. If you go out there on a Wednesday practice, he's chasing Alec Pierce (senior wide receiver) all around the field, diving after the ball. To, that's where a guy of his caliber is different than a lot of the ones I've been around. He's not the only one. After being around a lot of high-end corners, he's the only one that is a joy to be around all the time, at practice and off the field."

On if he compares the program to Ohio State

"Look, it's the same thing we tell our kids, we want to be us. We're not trying to be someone else. I think that is the best image that we can have. So, whether it's Ohio State or Kentucky, teams you recruit against, the more success we have, the more opportunities we have to compete, and not just on the football field, but in the recruiting battles. I think that's where some of the rivalries occur. When I came here, a mindset of mine was, 'I hope someday, that we could become a rival to my alma mater (Ohio State).' In that way, I mean that all the sudden, maybe they look at you and recognize that they have to battles against us. Whether we play them on the football field or not, a lot of the other opportunities are in recruiting. That's where we continue to want to be. And that's not just the Ohio State stuff, that's being a Top 10 program. It's one thing to beat them, it's another thing to be in the mix with them in all that we do. So, we're not trying to be somebody else, I've never tried to be someone else, I don't want our kids to try to be someone else...So, I think it kind of goes into that theme all year of, 'Hey, you're not winning by enough,' or, 'You didn't play well enough,'" and after 6-7 games, I came in here in this exact room and said that we don't have to be somebody else's vision of us, we've got to continue to be us. Enjoy what it is that we do and how we do it. It goes all back into, if you're going to be a Top 10 program, and want to compete with those Top 10 programs, you've got to do it on a consistent basis in all that you do."

On current players and signees from Colerain

"That group fits who we are and what we want to be. That whole image of this is a tough sport. for tough people, every one of those kids who have come here have thrived when they've walked in. I'm not saying they all started. They've had to sacrifice and commit. When they were a triple-option team, people might have discouraged it some, like Ja'von Hicks, but they all love to play football. We'll do a study after recruiting about all the high schools in Ohio and who goes Division I and how they're faring, and I'm not sure there's a better group than those from there."

On kicker Ryan Coe, the team's only transfer addition

"Competition is what you create. When Cole Smith went down, it took away some of who can get better. We've struggled a bit in the kicking game, particularly in field goals, but Ryan can bring us some competition there in the spring. The unique thing is it doesn't matter where you come from, Division II, III, IV, I don't know. It's still the same ball, kicked off the same ground and same distance. We'll see what he can do to really help us."

On signing seven linemen over both sides of the ball

"That's the crew in which we'll lose a lot of seniors. The offense does have a lot of juniors. When you lose those guys, they're the ones that are the most difficult to replace. We have a few coming in early and that's a big deal for that position. A lot of their development needs to start early. The game changes more for those guys than anyone, particularly with the speed, size and physicality in which it needs to be played. It's gonna fill a spot for us. You can never come up short on either line. You can move some wideouts, DBs and athletes at different spots, but in order to develop, if you have no offensive or defensive line, you get nothing done. I'm excited about having three offensive and four defensive linemen, and I think they'll fit the culture really well."

On quarterback signee Luther Richesson

"Luther is unique. Obviously, quarterbacks are a unique position and Desmond Ridder is a senior we will lose. I wish Luther could be here in the spring, but I don't think he's one of the early enrollees. Where he comes from, I think he'll have the opportunity to walk in and compete. He is mature beyond his years and he's trained a lot from a young age. His father was an NFL strength coach, so he's been around those locker rooms and in those situations. He played for Trent Dilfer in high school, so he's been trained like quarterbacks have held on them. He's an intelligent kid who can pick up on things fast and be ready to compete."

On the transfer portal's evolution

"You have some juniors who could possibly leave, like Ahmad Gardner, Jerome Ford and Josh Whyle. If those happened, you might look at those spots. You have some seniors who are out that could come back. If they do, then maybe you don't need to look. The transfer portal is something we only look at to fill gaps, like young guys and old guys, who may have left early and that's where those happen. We don't want to make our living there. We were pretty good before the portal, even with grad transfers, about looking at what we look for and need if we are going to bring a non-high school kid into our program. That's the most difficult thing: roster management and seeing where our numbers are. We've had some guys leave, but fortunate to not have as many. Some guys wanted to play and may not have had that opportunity right away."